

CHABAD OF OXFORD - YOM LIMMUD - 22 Nov 2015

“MAIMONIDES”

Maimonides on Creation

Naftali Loewenthal (University College London)
n.loewenthal@ucl.ac.uk

Thirteen Principles of Faith

Popular versions: first printed on the familiar brief form in Venice Haggadah of 1566, and Krakow Prayerbook of 1596):

- 1. I believe with complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is the Creator and Guide of all the created beings, and that He alone has made, does make, and will make all things.
- 4. I believe with complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is the first and the last.

The **Yigdal** poem, based on the 13 Principles, said to have been written by Daniel ben Judah, 14th cent. Rome:

1. ...He exists, unbounded by time in His existence נמצא ואין עת אל מציאותו
4. He preceded every being that was created - the First, and nothing preceded His precedence

קדמון לכל דבר אשר נברא, ראשון ואין ראשית לראשיתו

These are popular versions, not written by Maimonides.

The actual text of the 13 Principles of Faith from his Commentary on the Mishnah (1168) reads:

1. To believe in the existence of the Creator; that there is an Existent complete in all the senses of the word “existence”. He is the cause of all existence. In Him all else subsists and from Him derives. It is inconceivable that He does not exist, for should He not exist the existence of all else would be extinguished and nothing could persist. If we imagine the absence of any other existent thing, however, G-d’s existence would not thereby be extinguished nor diminished. For unity and mastery are only G-d’s, since He is sufficient to Himself. All else, whether angels or celestials and whatever is in them or below them, needs Him to exist. This first fundamental principle is taught in the Biblical verse: “I am the L-rd your G-d” (Ex 20:2).

2... [G-d is One]

3... [G-d is incorporeal]

4. We are to believe that the One is absolutely eternal; no thing existed before Him, as many Scriptural verses prove. This fourth fundamental principle is taught in the Biblical verse: “A dwelling-place is the Eternal G-d” (Deut.

33:27). מענה אלקי קדם.

[5. We can pray only to G-d. 6. Prophecy. 7. The unique Prophecy of Moses. 8. Torah from G-d. 9. The Torah should not be changed. 10. G-d knows all. 11. Reward and punishment. 12. The Messiah. 13. The Revival of the Dead]

Mishneh Torah (completed 1178)

Laws of the Foundations of the Torah

Ch.1

1. The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdoms is to know that there is a Primary Being who brings ממיצא all existence into being. All the entities in the heavens, the earth, and what between them came into existence only from the truth of His being למצאו ולא נמצאו אלא מאמיתת המצאו.

2. If one would imagine that He does not exist, no other being could possibly exist.

3. If one would imagine that none of the entities aside from Him exist, He alone would continue to exist, and the nullification of their existence would not nullify His existence, because all the other entities require Him and He, blessed be He, does not require them nor any one of them. Therefore, the truth [of His existence] does not resemble the truth [of any of their existence].

אין אמיתתו כאמיתת אחד מהם

.....

5. This entity is the G-d of the world and the L-rd of the entire earth. He controls the Sphere with infinite and unbounded power. This power continues without interruption, because the sphere is constantly revolving, and it is impossible for it to revolve without it being caused to revolve. It is He, blessed be He, Who causes it to revolve without a hand or any other corporeal aspect.

Many Jewish scholars accepted the idea that these texts fully accord with Genesis 1:1 - "In the beginning, G-d created Heaven and Earth". But some did not.

R. Joseph Albo (Spain, 1380-1444) thought there are only 3 basic principles of Jewish belief: The existence of G-d, Reward and Punishment, the Divine origin of the Torah. He thought it was good to believe in G-d's creation of the world, but did not think one was a heretic if one did not.

"Creation *ex nihilo* is a dogma which every one who professes a divine law is obliged to believe, in the same way as he who professes the Law of Moses is obliged to believe that the earth opened her mouth and swallowed up Korah and his congregation, because they rebelled against Moses. But it is not one of the fundamental principles of divine Law, whose existence can not be conceived without it."

(Albo, *Ikkarim* "Principles" I:12, trans Husik, p.230). The idea that there are 'true beliefs' and 'fundamental principles' had been expressed by Hasdai Crescas (1340-1412).

Albo distinguishes between the eternity of the universe as taught by Aristotle, which would make the miracles of the Torah impossible, and another view (which Maimonides ascribes to Plato), that G-d created the world from eternal matter:

“..if one believes in the eternity of the world after the manner of Aristotle... the whole Torah falls to the ground. But one may believe that there is a primary eternal matter, from which the world was created when and as G-d willed.” (Albo I:12, p.230.)

“For this reason Maimonides did not include [belief in Creation *ex nihilo*] among the fundamental dogmas of the Torah” (Albo, 231.)

But Albo recognises that Maimonides regards one who does not believe in G-d’s Creation of the universe as a heretic. That means, it is right to believe it. Nonetheless (in Albo’s view) it is not one of the 13 Principles of Faith.

Mishneh Torah: Laws of Repentance 3:7, definition of a heretic:

“Five [kinds of people] are described as a heretic *min*: one who says there is no G-d.; one who says there is G-d, but there are two or more ; one who says there is one, but He has a bodily form; one who says He was not alone the First and the Creator of everything *צור לכל* ; one who serves a star [or anything] as an intermediary between him and the Master of the World.”

Maimonides describes Abraham discovering the concept of G-d:

“He realized that there was one G-d who controlled the Sphere, that He created everything *הכל ברא* and that there is no other G-d at all..” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, 1:3).

Guide of the Perplexed (1190) 2:1

Here Maimonides is bringing different proofs for the existence of G-d. He seemingly adopts Aristotle’s view that the universe is eternal.

“Accordingly, if the motion in question is perpetual and eternal, as is stated by our adversary¹.. it follows necessarily.. that the first cause of the movement of the sphere.... is separate from the sphere..” (Pines trans. 245-6).

Since the Sphere is moving with an eternal force, there must be a Prime Mover with infinite power which is moving it. That is G-d.

Concerning this proof for the existence of G-d, Albo writes:

[since this proof] “is built on [the idea of] constant eternal motion, as the Philosopher [Aristotle] assumes, and this is something which no member of the Divine religion, believing in Creation, can accept”, he is not going to discuss it at all. (II:5).

In the 19th century, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the Tzemach Tzedek (1789-1866), third Lubavitcher Rebbe, in his *Book of Philosophy, Path of Faith*, quotes Albo but defends this proof for the existence of G-d, and makes the following comment about Maimonides’s strategy:

¹ יריבנו in Kafih.

“Maimonides explained the fact that he presents this proof according to the words of Aristotle, in order to prove the existence of G-d, even according to the view of those who believe the universe is eternal, so that they could not say that this [the existence of G-d] could only be proved if one believes in the Creation of the universe. After proving the existence of G-d according to all opinions, then he demonstrates with proofs the faith in the Creation of the Universe”².

Book of Philosophy 2a-b. This approach of the Zemah Zedek to Maimonides on Creation is found earlier in the 16th-17th cent. Lublin scholar Gedalia Lipshitz’s commentary *Etz Shatul* to Albo’s *Ikkarim*, first published in 1618-19, with a later edition in 1836 in Sudilkov. The Zemah Zedek quotes this commentary and its defence of Maimonides on fol 3b.

Where does Maimonides explain this? The reference is probably to **Guide** 1:71, (Pines 181-2). Maimonides makes the point there that if one believes the universe was created, it obviously has a Creator. The point is to prove the existence of G-d for one who believes the universe is eternal.

After writing the **Guide**, Maimonides added a footnote to his text of the 4th of the Thirteen Principles of Faith in the *Commentary on the Mishnah*:

“And know that the great fundament of the Torah of Moses our teacher is that the world is created. G-d formed it and created it after complete nothingness. The fact that you see that I circle round the idea of the eternity of the world [*she-ani sovev saviv inyan kadmut ha-olam*] according to the opinion of the philosophers is in order that there should be definite proof of [G-d’s] existence, as I have explained and clarified in the *Guide*.”

After 1190 Maimonides wrote 10 medical works. One is “**Medical Aphorisms**” transl. Fred Rosner. Much of this presents the views of Galen (130-210), the great Physician. However, Galen ridiculed the Jewish concept of G-d and the idea of miracles. So on p.443-4:

“This falsifying and inexact Galen, extremely ignorant in most things of which he speaks, except in the art of medicine, repeatedly states and explains that he is skeptical on this point,, namely the basic principle of the creation of the world, and does not know whether it is eternal or created.... Therefore he should have also been skeptical (ie agnostic) about [miracles. Instead he denies them completely]. This shows his ignorance concerning of the adherence of the twig to the root [if only skeptical about A, one should only be skeptical about B which derives from A].”

² See the note on fol.2a by Rabbi Menachem Schneerson (1902-1994), who edited this work. This text is from a manuscript of the *Book of Philosophy*, fol.18a.